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ABSTRACT

Immediately preceding or following the national election campaigns of 1972, 1974, and 1976, interviews were conducted with a longitudinal probability sample of 307 voters to determine the extent to which changes in voters' patterns of dependence on newspapers as opposed to television for political information occurred over the successive campaigns. The study also examined ways in which these changes were associated with changes in voters' levels of campaign involvement, modes of decision making about candidates, and variables related to political volatility. The overall results did not indicate that change in dependence from one medium to another was associated with the range of campaign orientations investigated. However, the relationships found in several specific instances--for example, that switching from newspapers to television may increase campaign involvement--gave preliminary support to the argument that, in some instances, media dependence patterns are integrally associated with specific kinds of voter campaign orientations. The findings did not support the belief that volatility in political behavior is necessarily a function of changes in media dependence patterns. Finally, there was no indication that changing to or continuing dependence on television over successive campaigns particularly decreased beliefs that public officials were altruistic or trustworthy. (Author/FL)

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Theory and Methodology Division

MEDIA DEPENDENCE AND POLITICAL CHANGE:

A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF THREE ELECTIONS

by

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In many instances it is probably useful to study functions and effects of political communication from the traditional viewpoint that while communicatory behaviors vary considerably between individuals, they are generally stable within individuals over time (cf. Chaffee, 1975). Yet it also would seem that at least in the case of campaign-related media behaviors, change can and does occur in audience members over time, and in particular this may happen in accordance with the constraints of specific political campaign situations.

Citizens are likely to enter each campaign environment with a considerable amount of stored knowledge shaped by years of politically socializing experiences, including communicatory ones. Most voters are apt to have learned the rudiments of campaign processes over the course of several elections, and they may be quite discerning in their usage of campaign-relevant media. Voters may well approach various categories of elections with rather clear expectations as to the strategies they will use either in making ballot choices or in buttressing choices already formulated. They may have similarly developed sets of tactics to employ for the purposes of seeking out pertinent information and manipulating the campaign environment for maximum advantage.

Just as earlier hypotheses that voting behavior could be assumed relatively constant from election to election have come under serious review and revision, so should the prevailing assumption that campaign communication behaviors remain

constant. If political communication varies in mode and potential for consequence over the course of a campaign (Chaffee and Choe, 1979), there is no reason that it shouldn't vary from campaign to campaign, assuming respective changes in political environment. For example, voters were found to change in information-seeking patterns exhibited during the 1974 national election campaigns as compared to those of 1972, doubtless in part a result of the more localized aspects of the latter election and perhaps the intervening Watergate episodes as well (O'Keefe, Mendelsohn and Liu, 1976). It has also long been clear that television is the most popular medium among voters for following the nationally based presidential campaigns, while newspapers appear to have the edge in statewide and local contests (cf. Roper, 1977). The difference is not simply a matter of personal citizen preference, but in part it results from the greater amount of journalistic coverage network television gives to national events, particularly those as drama-laden and entertaining as are most presidential campaigns.

More important than simply noting such change in audience behaviors is the need to discern the functional antecedents of that change and the consequences it has for political orientations. The issue is important not only because of the renewed emphasis on time functions of communications (cf. Kline, 1977), but also in terms of the apparent decreased stability of contemporary political processes. As citizens shift in their criteria for deciding whether to vote or not, and for whom to vote if they do, they may also well be changing their communication behaviors.

Much of the current interest in changing political orientations has centered on the concept of volatility (Blumler, 1975; McLeod, Bybee, Luetscher and Garramone, 1978). Western democracies in recent years have been characterized as becoming

more "volatile" in the sense of the political behaviors of their constituencies being more difficult to predict in terms of such traditional indicators as socialization variables, political party ties and demographics. Increased volatility in the United States appears to have taken the form of increased abstention rates, reduced party affinities, split-ticket voting and diminished citizen trust in political personages and organizations.

Clear theoretical and empirical linkages between volatility and mass media usage appear somewhat lacking at this point. The prevalent line of reasoning concerning such a relationship is based on the observation that increased volatility has occurred concurrent with greater dependence upon television as a source of political information and, presumably, of political influence. More specifically, Robinson (1976) has contended that the rise in political disaffection and malaise results from television news content and particular audience attributes. He has argued that among the factors leading to this "videomalaise" are television's large "inadvertent" news-viewing audience, the relatively high credibility attached to networks by audiences, the interpretive nature of and negativistic emphasis in network reportage, and what Robinson sees as emphasis on violence, conflict and anti-institutional themes in video news. While Robinson offers intriguing empirical support for his contentions, conflicting evidence has been offered by Miller, Erbring and Goldenberg (1976), Becker and Whitney (1978) and O'Keefe (In press). McLeod et al. (1978) were unable to find indications that any of their rather extensive measures of behavioral and subjective political volatility were associated with either newspaper or television usage during the 1976 presidential campaign. A related rationale for a media usage - volatility linkage rests upon the fact that increased volatility has paralleled the increasing proportion of young adults entering politically relevant life stages, and upon some empirical support that the young are more susceptible to media influence (Blumler

and McLeod, 1974; O'Keefe and Mendelsohn, 1978). However, key tests of the causal nature of this relationship remain to be executed.

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) suggest a more general theoretically derived linkage between overall media dependence and political change, arguing that dependency is apt to be heightened during periods of increased structural conflict and change within societies. They reason that since such conflict and change typically challenge established social arrangements for coping with societal norms and mores, greater dependence on media information as an aid in coping results. And, such increased dependence raises the potential for the media to effect cognitive, affective and behavioral changes upon audiences. Moreover, given the systemic relationship between media, audiences and strucural stability within society, changes brought about by media within audiences may have a reciprocal impact on both media and society.

Audience dependence on a particular medium is also influenced by both the number and the centrality of specific information functions provided by that medium, according to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur. Applying this to the possible differences between newspaper and television dependence discussed above, it would seem that in contemporary American society television offers the greater number of information functions for the public at large. However, in the case of providing politically relevant information, newspapers may be more central, or more essential, to politically involved persons requiring detailed, in-depth description of campaign issues. Television, on the other hand, may be perceived as providing a wider range of more central information pertaining to the sweep of campaign events and imagery. Similarly, the greater technical and economic ability of newspapers to provide localized political coverage promotes the centrality of the press as a local affairs information source. Centrality

is likely to vary over both situation and time. Hence, the degree of political centrality for either newspapers or television could be expected to shift not only according to audience dispositions, but with situational and temporal changes as well. So, presumably, would their potential for increasing political volatility within society.

Apart from whatever volatizing potential mass media may have, the varying political orientations and media usage patterns individuals bring to different election campaigns have been neglected, by and large, in communication research. It is important to examine not only those media usages which can be assumed constant from campaign to campaign, but also those which are subject to change depending upon the circumstances of a particular campaign. The present research takes an exploratory look in that direction and aims at associating such changes with a wider range of voter orientations toward campaigns than has been investigated previously.

Specifically, we examine the extent to which changes in patterns of media dependence (newspapers vs. television) occur over successive campaigns and how they may be associated with changes in voters' levels of involvement in the campaigns, modes of voter decision-making, and volatility-related variables. A general expectation was that shifts from one medium to another across campaigns would be accompanied by changes in the above voter orientations, and that in particular shifts among voters to television dependence would be associated with increased volatility over time. Also investigated was the extent to which such changes occur as a function of educational level and of age, since the more educated and older are generally portrayed as more politically stable as well.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The study focuses upon change in media dependence and political orientations occurring between the 1972, 1974 and 1976 national election campaigns. Interviews were conducted immediately preceding or following each election with a longitudinal probability sample of 307 residents of Summit County (Akron), Ohio, who voted in each election. Even given panel attrition -- 65 percent of the original 1972 voting sample were lost over the four years, either through nonresponse or through voting abstention -- the cohort remained quite representtative of the population. In fact, actual election results were within five percent of the sample "vote" in all three elections. Specifically examined were voters' responses to the 1972 presidential contest between McGovern and Nixon, the 1974 Ohio statewide races for U.S. senator (Glenn vs. Perk) and governor (Gilligan vs. Rhodes) -- the sample was split-halved for specific items on each contest -- and the Carter-Ford campaign in 1976.

Somewhat analytically constraining for the purposes at hand is the fact that each wave of interviews was geared toward somewhat different goals, e.g. assessing Watergate reactions in 1974 and Carter-Ford debate effects in 1976. Hence a rather limited group of items asked over all three waves are applicable to the present study.

Relative dependence on newspapers vs. television was ascertained by asking respondents which source they counted on most for information about the election campaign. Specific attributes composing the campaign involvement dimension were: campaign interest ("How interested were you in the election campaign?... Would you say that you were very interested, somewhat interested, or not at all interested?"); campaign attention ("Did you find yourself paying a great deal

of attention to what was going on in the campaign, some attention, or no attention at all?"); and discussion of the campaign ("Would you say that you discussed the campaign with family, friends and others very often, occasionally, or hardly at all?").

Voter decision-making aspects measured included: difficulty of decision ("How difficult was it to decide to vote for (candidate) -- was it very difficult, somewhat difficult, or not at all difficult?"); and choice criterion ("In deciding to vote for (candidate), which one of these things was the most important to you: his political party, the personal qualities of the man himself, or the stand he took on political issues?"). Attributes relating to volatility included political party identification, sense of altruism of politicians ("Most of our leaders are devoted to the service of our country." -- agree, disagree), and trust in politicians ("Politicians never tell us what they really think." -- agree, disagree).

Changes in the panel as a group over the three campaigns held few surprises given the nature of the elections considered (Table 1). Campaign involvement indices dropped rather sharply between the 1972 presidential campaign and the statewide races of 1974, and then they rose again during the Carter-Ford contest. As might be expected, the 1976 election appeared to be the most difficult for voters in terms of deciding upon a candidate. 1972 candidate choices were the most likely to have been made on the basis of issue-related attributes, as earlier work has suggested (Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1976). While the proportion of party-independent voters remained fairly stable over the three campaigns, after 1972 there was a drastic drop in number of voters agreeing that political figures were altruistic and trustworthy. Once again the sizeable import of Watergate on political behavior seems apparent. Again as expected, television

was the medium of choice for both presidential contests, while newspapers won out for the state races.

Controlling the above results for education and age did not substantially attenuate the overall relationships; however, the more educated appeared somewhat less volatile over the three campaigns, most noticeably changing less on indices of altruism and trust. Decidedly greater proportions of the college-educated saw their 1976 candidate choices as difficult and turned to newspapers during that campaign.

It should be noted that consistency among individual voters from campaign to campaign on most indices was relatively high. For example, over two-thirds of those expressing high interest in the 1972 campaign followed suit in 1974, and nearly three-quarters of those highly interested in 1976 had also been highly concerned in 1972. Similarly, over half of the voters depending on newspapers in 1972 did so in 1974 and in 1976. Sixty-six percent of those choosing television in 1972 also called it their medium of choice in 1976.

Not as much difference as might have been expected was found between campaign orientations of newspaper versus television dependers within each campaign (Table 2). There was no particular indication of newspaper dependers being consistently more involved in the campaigns or differing from television dependers on vote choice attributes. Moreover, the television dependent were more involved than their newspaper counterparts in the 1976 campaign. Whether this resulted from peculiarities of the ways in which television was used in the Carter-Ford race or from a generally growing reliance on television in presidential campaigns among the more concerned voters is unclear at this point. The "videomalaise" hypothesis finds support here in that a lower proportion of

voters expressing trust in politicians were included in the ranks of those dependent on television, particularly in 1974.

However, there was no overall indication that individual change in dependence from one medium to another is a function of change of political orientations (Tables 3 and 4). Generally, consistent dependence upon either television or newspapers across campaigns was not associated with any more change in orientation than was shifting from one medium to another.

Some interesting changes did nonetheless occur within specific time frames. For instance, between 1972 and 1974 political trust dropped substantially more among voters consistent in media dependence than it did among those who switched media. It does not appear to matter whether the medium repeatedly used was newspapers or television, but what seems important is the consistency itself. Given that the Watergate crises took place between the 1972 and 1974 elections, consistent dependence upon either medium may have provided a clearer perspective on the "reality" of that complex political situation, and this may have translated into reduced trust in White House figures, if not in political personages in general. Flip-flopping from one medium to the other between the two campaigns may have resulted in a certain loss of continuity and possible confusion over the situation. While newspapers were clearly in the forefront of Watergate reportage, continued dependence on television over a lengthy period could have yielded a comprehensible albeit limited version of the events taking place.

Interestingly, political trust remained almost constant among consistent medium-dependers between 1974 and 1976 while dropping somewhat among medium-changers. Perhaps consistent dependers "bottomed out" around 1974, but switchers took a bit longer to do so. Also in the 1974-1976 frame, consistency in dependence

was associated with choosing of candidates on issue-related attributes and with more political discussion. The greater import attached to the 1976 race by some voters may have been conducive to consistency in media dependence insofar as the main channel was concerned, but conducive also to seeking out other sources including interpersonal ones. Not only was there no evidence of television dependence being correlated with "anti-issue" or "image" voting, but consistent dependence on television did not seem to decrease issue relevance over time.

What was most associated with television dependence over the campaigns, however, was an increase in political interest in both time frames. The proportion of voters "highly interested" in the campaign jumped markedly among those switching from newspapers to television and those remaining with television over the 1974 and 1976 campaigns. A more moderate increase was found for consistent newspaper-dependers, while switchers from television to newspapers showed no change. The latter finding is noteworthy given the overall increased interest between 1974 and 1976. It is tempting to explain away television's association with higher interest with the fact that presidential campaigns are more suited to television's bailiwick; however, both switching to television and consistent use of that medium in the 1972-1974 time frame were associated with less decrease in interest than the corresponding patterns for newspapers. The marginal comparisons between television and newspapers on interest level also support the role of television as being as much a medium of choice for more interested voters as newspapers, a role which is quite likely to increase over the years. This appeared particularly true for the less-educated voters; but it should be noted that more 1976 television-dependers found their candidate choices to be more difficult than they were in 1974. More voters who depended on television in 1976 also moved into the party-independent category.

The above analyses were partialled into college-educated versus non-college-educated subgroups, and also into two age categories, 18 to 34 and those 35 and over. Despite markedly low cell sizes in many instances, there appeared to be a trend for increased campaign involvement among lesser educated and younger voters to be associated with switching to and consistent use of television, particularly in the 1974-76 time frame. Conversely, increased involvement among older and more educated voters appeared to follow shifts to newspaper dependence, again more so in the 1974-76 period.

DISCUSSION

The above data have been used to explore changes in political orientations and patterns of dependence upon newspapers and television over three election campaigns. The overall results do not indicate that change in dependence from one medium to another is generally associated with changes in the range of campaign orientations investigated here. However, the relationships found in several specific instances, e.g., the finding that switching to television may increase involvement, lend preliminary support to an argument that in some situations media dependence patterns are integrally associated with specific kinds of voter campaign orientations. All in all, it is also difficult to make a case that volatility in political behavior overall is necessarily a function of changes in media dependence patterns. While there was some marginal support for the "videomalaise" hypothesis, there was no indication that changing from dependence on newspapers to television or continued dependence on television over successive campaigns particularly decreased beliefs that public officials were altruistic and trustworthy. In Robinson's view, such an association would be most likely to occur among the least educated; yet among these data the only circumstance under which a case could be made for such an inference was among college-educated voters who switched from newspapers to television. 11

While the results concerning television dependence were somewhat mixed for the high versus low education groups, it did come through that shifting to and continued use of television is related to greater political involvement and that the association is particularly strong among less-educated voters. This finding parallels previous results (cf. O'Keefe, in press) suggesting that television may play an integrative role for the less educated in terms of readily involving them in political processes. For the more educated with perhaps more extensive politically socializing experience in their background, newspapers may be more appropriate for such a role. Younger voters appeared similarly stimulated by television.

Subsequent inquiry might consider the varying kinds of functions and effects choice of media dependence could have for groups of voters with different levels of political experience over time within specific campaign frameworks. For example, the more politically experienced voters might be more manipulative of the media in terms of more purposively choosing television or newspapers, and specific content areas within each, according to the kinds of information and influence needs they have in a particular election. On the other hand, the less experienced may find themselves having more potential to be manipulated by the media as a result of perhaps somewhat randomly choosing sources of political content in the media, and then becoming dependent upon those sources through continued yet relatively uncritical usage. Greater political and communicatory sophistication may be enhanced in part by both higher education levels and older age.

Future inquiry might well be based upon longitudinal methodologies which can discriminate between communication-related changes resulting from campaign-specific versus cyclical versus secular factors (McLeod et al., 1977). For example, the increase in television dependence among more interested voters in 1976 could have been a function totally or in part of several variables, including

heightened usage by the candidates of the medium in a close contest (a campaign-specific factor), increased usage of television during national as opposed to statewide campaigns (a cyclical factor), and the secular factor of a general rise in reliance on television as more "TV generation" citizens mature into politically active roles. Equally important are designs which can describe relationships between these campaign-specific, cyclical and secular changes in media usage and other kinds of politically relevant behaviors, and preferably discern directions of causality. Measures incorporated into such designs also need to assess motivations underlying media uses and expected consequences of such behaviors.

More sophisticated items suited for multivariate analyses might allow the construction of various media usage - campaign orientation typologies. For example, a tentative suggestion from the data above is that there is an emerging group of highly interested voters primarily dependent upon television who also exhibit difficulty in choosing candidates and tend to be party independent. This group sounds not unlike DeVries and Tarrance's (1972) split-ticket voter profile. The key here, however, is to identify within that typology the patterns of change undergone from election to election as the political environment changes. One possibility from the results reported here is that among less-educated voters, both switching to television and continued reliance on it builds interest, or vice versa. Or, perhaps the relationship is a reciprocating one over the years. The associations between media dependence and campaign orientations across elections did not vary greatly between the college-educated and non-college-educated voting groups.

It should be noted that the above research, as well as recent allied efforts in this area, may run something of a risk in being overconcerned with effects

resulting from differential dependence upon newspapers versus television. It could be that for many of the campaign orientations measured here, change in overall dependence on mass media versus other agents is a more critical factor. For example, while there was only slight variation between newspaper and television dependency in the 1972 versus 1976 presidential contests, there may have been greater overall media reliance in 1976 given the greater ambiguities in both candidates' personalities and issue positions. Moreover, heightened political volatility may obtain as much from decreases in dependence upon such intrinsic information sources as party organizations and interpersonal contacts as from increases in dependence on either newspapers, television or a combination of media.

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TABLE 1

Campaign Orientations: 1972, 1974 and 1976 (n=307)

	1972	1974	1976
High Interest	59%	50%	71%
(High Ed.)[1]	67	53	69
(Older)	63	53	75
High Attention	56%	37%	66%
(High Ed.)	62	38	64
(Older)	59	42	71
High Discussion	23%	22%	46%
(High Ed.)	24	24	48
(Older)	20	26	48
Difficulty	20%	23%	28%
(High Ed.)	18	23	35
(Older)	18	20	25
Issue-Based	59%	38%	49%
(High Ed.)	63	35	46
(Older)	56	37	46
Party Independent	25%	28%	27%
(High Ed.)	34	34	35
(Older)	23	25	24
High Altruism	69%	51%	54%
(High Ed.)	69	60	63
(Older)	69	49	53
High Trust	43%	33%	25%
(High Ed.)	34	32	32
(Older)	49	33	22
Newspaper Dependence	36%	50%	36%
(High Ed.)	36	55	43
(Older)	39	54	36
Television Dependence	51%	38%	48%
(High Ed.)	48	29	37
(Older)	50	34	48

[1] At least some college; n=124

[2] Age 35 and over; n=230

TABLE 2

Campaign Orientation by Media Dependence: 1972, 1974 and 1976 (n=307)

	1972		1974		1976	
	NP (n=111)	TV (n=157)	NP (n=154)	TV (n=117)	NP (n=110)	TV (n=147)
High Interest	62%	60%	53%	48%	64%	76%
High Attention	57	56	40	33	62	69
High Discussion	21	16	23	21	44	47
Difficulty	20	19	25	22	29	26
Issue-Based	61	57	40	37	47	48
Party Independent	28	23	29	26	28	26
High Altruism	69	70	52	50	55	52
High Trust	49	39	40	23	27	20

TABLE 3

Campaign Orientation Change by Media Dependence Shift: 1972-1974

	Newspaper-Newspaper (n=64)	Newspaper-Television (n=30)	Television-Television (n=95)	Television-Newspaper (n=68)
High Interest	-16%	- 6%	- 7%	-11%
High Attention	-12	-14	-23	-19
High Discussion	4	10	-12	4
Difficulty	11	10	- 8	2
Issue-Based	-11	-13	-14	-20
Party Independent	28	10	7	11
High Altruism	-17	-20	-22	-16
High Trust	-13	- 3	-13	- 2

TABLE 4

Campaign Orientation Change by Media Dependence Shift: 1974-1976

	Newspaper-Newspaper (n=62)	Newspaper-Television (n=69)	Television-Television (n=77)	Television-Newspaper (n=35)
High Interest	16%	30%	24%	0%
High Attention	18	36	32	20
High Discussion	28	17	32	23
Difficulty	0	14	7	5
Issue-Based	14	- 7	13	- 9
Party Independent	- 9	4	4	- 6
High Altruism	- 1	5	- 6	6
High Trust	3	-12	0	- 9